

# Police Supervision in the 21st Century: Can Traditional Work Standards and the Contemporary Employee Coexist?

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**T**here is little doubt that most police supervisors, at whatever level of the organization, have felt the frustration inherent in the attempted application of traditional work standards to employees whose viewpoints are strikingly different from the supervisors' standards.

Executives often hear that the morale of the department is poor. Older supervisors cannot understand how this is possible given today's vastly improved salaries, benefits, equipment, and training. Often the so-called morale issues are more the result of the clash between established traditions and standards and the differing views of supervisors and subordinates.

Although history is full of examples of earlier generations bemoaning the hopelessness and demise of the next generation, the workplace today is truly at an interesting juncture. In the book *When Generations Collide*, authors Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman assert that for the first time in history four different generations of employees have merged in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> The work ethic and organizational perspective of each of these generations has been influenced by a variety of different factors, thus leading to a number of "clashpoints."

In a police department organized along paramilitary lines, the stage is repeatedly set for a clash between the employee's need for autonomy and the supervisor's need for implementing and enforcing department policies and procedures. It is the nature of police employees, because of general personality characteristics and level of intelligence, to bristle at any type of supervision. Police employees tend to be independent and control-oriented, and they certainly do not want anyone telling them what to do. As such, it is completely normal to have an ongoing level of tension between employee's desire to work independently and the department's need to supervise employees.

Many of the newest employees have been raised in a more permissive and less structured social environment than once existed. As such, their activities were not directed and scrutinized to the extent that occurs in a law enforcement organization, leading to additional tension and conflict. Furthermore, many of today's senior law enforcement managers and supervisors have a military background so it is not a coincidence that those with military experience generally appear to have less difficulty in a paramilitary organization than the younger officers who may not have had such an experience. The reason for this is simple: the military experience provided intensive supervision so the transition to a paramilitary police organization is not difficult. However, newer employees without the military experience are experiencing this type of supervision for the first time. The net result of this assumption is that those who have not had previous experiences with continuous supervision must adapt accordingly, and those who have had those experiences must recognize that organizational life has changed and also must adapt.

In the Senior Executives in State and Local Government course at Harvard, a continual theme is that relationships are primary and all else is derivative. If this is accepted as being true, the next objective is to attempt to develop organizational relationships that are mutually satisfactory yet still accomplish the mission of the agency. This goal will obviously require an attempt to understand the diverse viewpoints being presented throughout the organization, without allowing these discussions to become excessively personalized.

In an effort to merge these often divergent viewpoints, it is incumbent upon police leaders to clearly articulate the values and beliefs of the department. It is critical that these issues be discussed in an open, uncomplicated manner, with significant limitations placed upon the length or complexity of the message because this is not intended as an academic exercise. These statements need to be concise and clearly understood.

Having experienced a variety of different issues related to police supervision throughout my career, I have attempted to distill this conflict of autonomy and supervision to certain core issues most commonly raised by employees. It is recommended that the reader consider these issues and adapt the core elements for working with their employees.

**Department Purpose:** The purpose for the existence of a police department is really quite simple. The department exists to provide professional, high-quality police services in a dignified manner. As such, everything else revolves around this principal, including supervisory practices.

**Character and Reputation:** Repeatedly emphasize that the effectiveness as an agency or as an employee of the agency lies with their reputation and character. The police environment is predominantly governed by the principle of "our word against their word." As such, reputations and character foundations must be as sound as humanly possible.

Character and reputation manifest themselves in the daily work, both in the field and organizationally. While employees in the field are continuously presented with challenges in this area, so too are the department's supervisors. Are we doing the right things for the right reasons? Are we abusing the authority and power that the organization has vested in us? Are we being as fair as humanly possible with the people that are working for us, understanding that "fair" does not necessarily mean that everyone receives the same treatment under all circumstances.

All should be striving to meet the highest standards of character and reputation, including being truthful on all matters, regardless of the uncomfortable consequences that may occur.

**Department Work Standards:** The work standards of the department must be very high and must always remain so. The combination of high standards, excellent personnel, and effective supervision contribute to the department's reputation, and should result in the department being respected in the community and being viewed as being both professional and effective.

Conflict regularly occurs in police departments because of reporting expectations. A technique to minimize this conflict is to ask the employees to take the view from the perception of the person reporting an offense. The complainant's expectation of a responding officer is a reasonable level of responsiveness, concern, and reporting accuracy. Officers view many of the calls they need to handle as boring, unnecessary, or minor in nature because of the things they do in the bigger picture of law enforcement. However, the complainant is viewing this situation as an issue of great importance, and all employees need to respond accordingly.

One simple strategy for an officer to use is to assume that the officer's contact with this person is the only contact that he or she will ever have with the department. What impression is being left of the agency by this contact?

**Supervisor Consistency:** It is impossible to have all supervisors act in a thoroughly consistent manner, just as it is impossible to have all officers handle calls in a completely consistent manner.

Each person has different styles, personalities, preferences, and expectations. Each supervisor bears the responsibility of trying to be as consistent as possible with each subordinate, within the context of that supervisor's particular style.

Each subordinate bears the responsibility of identifying or clarifying the expectations of a particular supervisor, with the understanding that each supervisor will be different to some extent. This adjustment by subordinates is unavoidable and does not end at any point in their career. This author has served as chief for 10 different city administrators in two different cities, and each had a different set of expectations. Clearly, it was my responsibility as the subordinate to the city administrator to adjust my performance accordingly.

First-line supervisors should have the ability to set the standards and expectations for their shift or unit in a manner that is consistent with the supervisor's personal beliefs, assuming that these beliefs are within department parameters. This includes the review of reports, assignment of personnel, recommendations for training opportunities, the assessment of performance, and so on. If given the opportunity to become a supervisor, it is safe to assume that any employee would hope for the same flexibility and latitude.

**Intensity of Supervision:** Another fact of life in any organization is that the intensity of supervision will vary, to some extent, based upon the subordinate's work performance and the supervisor or department's standards for performance.

Clearly, it is unacceptable to permit levels of supervision that are blatantly oppressive or unreasonable, be it for a group of subordinates or one officer. Should this occur, avenues must exist for bringing this issue to the attention of the next appropriate level in the chain of command. The employees of an organization must feel that the management is open to criticism and will not kill the messenger. If employees are unable or unwilling to bring these issues forward, it is unreasonable to expect any change to occur.

It is reasonable to assume that the best performers in terms of accuracy, effort, and thoroughness will receive a lesser level of supervision than those who do not consistently meet the described standards. That is, in fact, what supervision is all about, and this practice will continue.

Virtually every police scandal has at its core a lack of adequate first-line supervision. Inevitably, these scandals result in negative publicity or public perception, federal inquiries or consent decrees, civilian review boards, excessive litigation, or disintegrating organizational effectiveness. Most departments do not experience these types of issues for many reasons, not the least of which are excellent personnel and highly effective supervision. These departments know and practice having first-line supervisors should be in the field as often as possible, rather than being in the office. Not only does the supervisor provide an additional police presence, but this is also the best way to observe the performance of subordinates.

**"Targeted" Employees:** The perception that someone is always the "target" of department supervisors is a problem. If this is in fact occurring, it is management's responsibility to see that it stops.

It is safe to assume that in virtually any department there will be someone not performing to the standards expected. As such, this can clearly lead to the impression that someone is always on the hot seat. In disciplinary matters other employees are not always privy to all of the information or circumstances that may exist in a particular situation. While the person subject to discipline and certain other employment sanctions has the ability to share information more widely than does the department, the lack of information from management makes it appear the department is not forthcoming. State or federal statutes may prohibit discussion of certain employment or disciplinary information by the department until the situation is fully resolved. Because of this restriction, officers may not be fully aware of what has occurred, and officers' judgments may be formed on the basis of inaccurate or incomplete information.

That is not to say that department employees would automatically agree with the approach being taken by the department, even if the employees had all of the information, but their perception might be different if the information were available.

Employees who believe that they are being targeted must have the opportunity to express those concerns directly to the appropriate level in the chain of command, if they feel they are being treated in a manner that is not fundamentally fair. The employee's first step is to make an effort to meet with the supervisor in question and try to clarify the expectations. In addition, the employee needs look at himself or herself and ask if changes in behavior or performance would reduce the level of supervision that they are receiving.

Somehow, organizational members need to understand that intense supervision and disciplinary procedures are as time-consuming and annoying to the supervisors as they are to the subject of this attention. Supervisors do not enjoy this process. Rather, this approach is taken only out of necessity.

**Department Turnover:** To assume that there is something inherently wrong with an organization because of employee turnover is no longer as accurate an indicator as it was assumed to be in the past. There is substantial research telling administrators in all types of organizations that turnover will now be a common occurrence because of the changing viewpoints of younger employees.

Commitment to a specific organization is becoming less likely and, in fact, commitment to a specific career is becoming less likely as well. A report of a recent survey of police trainees in an academy indicated that a significant percentage of the trainees planned to leave their current agency within a couple of years. Interestingly, this is a survey of recruits who are not yet academy trained, yet some are already planning to leave their sponsoring department.

One of the primary reasons employees become dissatisfied with their current organization is their relationship with their immediate supervisor. As such, the department must strive to balance the need for effective supervision with the tendency to oversupervise.

Officers leave organizations, and will continue to do so in the future, for a variety of reasons. Some will leave because of working conditions (scheduling, supervision), some for expanded promotional or assignment opportunities, some for the excitement provided in larger communities, and some for still other reasons. It is safe to say that the assumption that employees are leaving because greener grass exists somewhere else is usually inaccurate. The goal as supervisors should be to present opportunities to our subordinates, in terms of training, actual field experiences, equipment, and working conditions, that are as good as, or better than, most of the agencies with whom we are competing for personnel.

It is unrealistic to believe that an organization will ever be perfect in the sense that everyone is happy, that there are no abuses of authority, or that there is no tension between various elements of the organization. It is critically important, however, that the police leadership create a productive and satisfying work environment, while still maintaining the highest possible performance standards.

Perhaps more importantly, leaders need to acknowledge the change that is occurring around them. In *Leadership on the Line*, Marty Linsky and Ronald Heifetz caution that "leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening."<sup>2</sup>

The challenge as leaders of supervisors is to respond to the massive change that is occurring in the organizations in a fashion that addresses the needs of the modern employee, the police entity, and the community at large. ■

<sup>1</sup> Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide* (New York: Haper Collins, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Marty Linsky and Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Havard Business School, 2002).

